

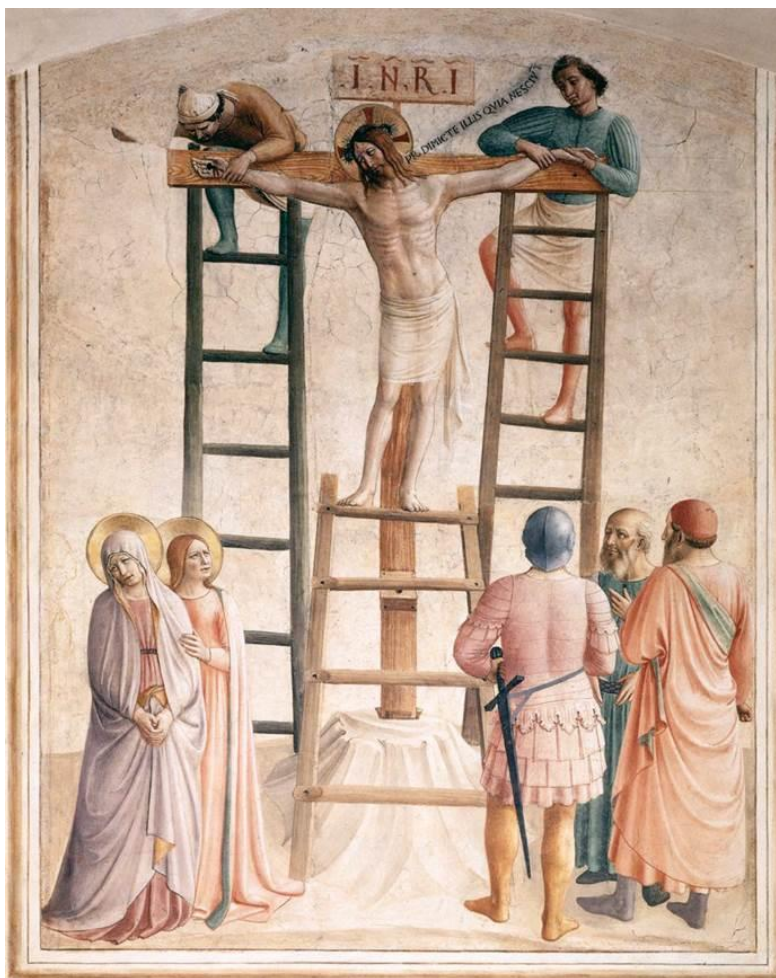


# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

*A Complete Catechesis for Christian Living*

Breaking Open the Word  
Mary Birmingham

## The Exaltation of the Cross | Year A



Fra Angelico: Nailing of Christ to the Cross, 1441-1442



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

#### *Anima Christi*

*Soul of Christ, sanctify me*

*Body of Christ, save me*

*Blood of Christ, inebriate me*

*Water from the side of Christ, wash me*

*Passion of Christ, strengthen me*

*O good Jesus, hear me*

*Within your wounds hide me*

*Let me never be separated from you.*

*Defend me from the malicious enemy.*

*In the hour of my death call me*

*And bid me come unto you*

*That I may praise you with your saints.*

*Forever and ever.*

*Amen*

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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Word worksheets  
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Doctrinal Sessions.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The cross was originally understood as the instrument of torture and death of Jesus.
- ▶ As Christianity evolved it became a sign of Jesus and Christianity itself.
- ▶ Empress Helena of Constantinople discovered the cross on September 14, 320.
- ▶ Two churches were built in honor and dedication of the cross five years later on September 13 in 325—the Martyrium (Church of the cross) and Church of the Anastasis.
- ▶ The cross of Helena was put on display and was venerated on September 14, 325.
- ▶ This event evolved into an annual feast.
- ▶ By the seventh century the feast was celebrated both by Constantinople in the east and Rome in the west.
- ▶ Churches that possessed a relic of the cross showed that relic to the people in a special celebration in honor of the cross called *Exaltatio* (*lifting up*).
- ▶ During the eighth century the Persians captured a relic of the cross in Gaul. The relic was later found and its return was celebrated with a special procession through the streets of Jerusalem on May 3.
- ▶ Rome later designated May 3 as the feast in honor of the return of the cross and called it the “Discovery of the Holy Cross”.
- ▶ The September 14 feast was called the “Exaltation of the Holy Cross.” That feast was incorrectly understood as a feast dedicated to the return of the cross. Pope John XXIII corrected the mistake by removing May 3 feast from the official calendar.
- ▶ The September 14 solemnity was restored to its original meaning of honoring the cross of Christ—not its return from captivity by the Persians.
- ▶ The cross is a sign of Jesus. It is a primary symbol of the Church and Christ is present to us in that symbol.
- ▶ We begin every liturgy of the Church with this sign of our identity.
- ▶ We sign ourselves as a sign of our commitment to live the Paschal Mystery of Christ—his life, death, resurrection and sending of the Holy Spirit.
- ▶ Catechumens are signed with the cross in the rite of acceptance as a sign that they are willing to enter into Jesus’ life, death and resurrection and join the joys and sorrows of their lives to the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ.
- ▶ Our Church teaches that when Christians offer their daily dyings and risings and join them to Jesus’ death and resurrection, they participate in the ongoing redemption of the world.
- ▶ We sign ourselves with the cross when we enter and leave church; when we begin every liturgical celebration; when we eat a meal and when we go to bed and wake up in the morning.
- ▶ The cross is the sign of Christ and the sign of the Christian life.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?

## First Reading: Numbers 21:4b-9

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

- ▶ **The snake was a sign of rebirth and fertility in ancient mythology.**
- ▶ People who were unharmed following a snakebite were considered protected by divine power.
- ▶ All of those images are present in this reading from the Book of Numbers.
- ▶ Consider the scene. The people of Israel are in the desert following their release from bondage in Egypt. God had just released them from four hundred years of captivity, yet they forgot what God had done for them.
- ▶ They accused God of sending them into the desert to perish.
- ▶ God was furious over their lack of trust in his providence and subsequently sent snakes. Many people were bitten and died.
- ▶ As with all calamity, they understood this horror to be a result of their sin. God was punishing them for their lack of faith.
- ▶ A familiar pattern in Scripture is illustrated in this story:
  - Israel was in a covenant relationship with their God who loved them and cared for them;
  - Israel sinned;
  - God punished them for their sin;
  - The people repented and returned wholeheartedly to the Lord;
  - God forgave them and restored their relationship with him.
- ▶ In this story the people eventually prayed for God to save them from the snakes.
- ▶ God instructed them to erect a pole and mold an image of a snake on that pole. Everyone who looked upon the pole would be restored—healed. (This is also the origin of the logo used by the medical community today.)
- ▶ Christians appropriated this image as a sign (a type) looking forward to the cross of Christ.
- ▶ The cross is a sign of healing, forgiveness and salvation.



## Mystagogy reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News for us today in this reading?
- ▶ What is your image of God? Do you believe God would send snakes to punish you for your sins?
- ▶ What is really being proclaimed in this text?
- ▶ What does this Scripture teach us about God's relationship with his people?
- ▶ What does it teach you about God's relationship with you?
- ▶ Have you or anyone you know ever had the experience of God's forgiveness?

## Second Reading: Philippians 2: 6-11

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one or both of the readings; simply make a statement about the reading such as:

**Paul is expressing his heartfelt belief in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ.**

- ▶ Scholars say that this hymn inserted into Paul's letter is a perfect synopsis of his theology of the cross.
- ▶ This was a hymn most likely used in liturgies of the early Christian church.
- ▶ The hymn heralds the Paschal Mystery of Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection. Jesus poured out his life—he emptied himself—he allowed himself to be humiliated to save the world.
- ▶ Jesus left his Divine throne at his Father's right hand and took the form of the lowest of the low.
- ▶ He subjected himself to the filthiest torture and death.
- ▶ He subjected himself to all things human—frustration, anger, humiliation, rejection, abandonment, shame, fear—all things except sin—in order to walk in our shoes and ultimately give his life to save the world.
- ▶ Jesus earned the title bestowed upon him. He truly is Lord/Kyrios (Greek) and Adonai (Hebrew).
- ▶ Paul was addressing a troublesome issue in his beloved Philippians' community. The community was embroiled in divisiveness and dissension.
- ▶ Paul begged his community to embrace the example of Christ—to humble themselves and lay down their lives for one another—to put their petty animosities aside and follow the lead of Christ who humiliated himself for the sake of others.
- ▶ If they would act in the person of Jesus then and only then could they hope for peace to be restored in their community.
- ▶ Jesus could have come as a king with all the power inherent in that role. He chose instead to come as a lowly artisan. "He became sin" that is, he entered the human condition with all its frailties. In so doing Jesus emptied himself in complete and utter kenosis (outpouring) of himself.
- ▶ Paul exhorted his community to let go of their need for power and control and empty themselves as Jesus emptied himself for them.
- ▶ He begged his people to offer themselves for the sake of the community.





## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. If time allows, catechist shares from his or her own life experience.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ How is Paul's message of pouring out one's self for the sake of others a message for us today?
- ▶ Where in our world is this attitude needed?
- ▶ Is there a situation in your life or the life of someone you know that would benefit from Paul's message today?
- ▶ What do you need to "let go of" in order to bring peace and harmony to your life or the life of your family or community?

### Gospel: John 3: 13-17

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

#### Gospel Exegesis

(Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.)

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?

### INTERPRETATION OF THE GOSPEL

- ▶ We see the fulfillment of the serpent episode in today's first reading.
- ▶ Jesus was lifted up on the cross just as Moses lifted the serpent staff as a sign of healing and God's saving power.
- ▶ Jesus was lifted up on the cross and as a result all humanity was and is saved; all humanity will enjoy eternal life with God as a result of his sacrifice.
- ▶ The sign of the cross will be for all time a sign of God's healing of the world—his saving power.
- ▶ The cross was transformed from an instrument of torture to a throne of grace and glory—it is why we **exalt** in the cross.
- ▶ The cross was a horror for the Jews of Jesus' time. To die on the cross was an abomination—the most unthinkable, unclean form of torture and death any Jew could endure.
- ▶ Romans were not subjected to death of this sort; it was the most defiled form of execution.
- ▶ For Jews the abomination of the cross was the unclean form of death. The flow of blood would have rendered a person unclean in the eyes of God.
- ▶ This is why the cross was a stumbling block for Jews. How could God save the

world by that which they believed God considered an unclean abomination—the flow of blood?

- ▶ What a paradox—this human object of scandal would become the ultimate throne of grace!
- ▶ John's Gospel echoes a royal liturgy—the enthronement of a king.
- ▶ The king is crowned from his mighty throne—the wooden throne of cross.
- ▶ Jesus went to his death with full and complete control of his destiny; he went willingly and with full power. He was aware of his pre-existence and that he was returning to his Father's right hand.
- ▶ Salvation has come full circle. Those who gazed upon Moses' serpent were saved; those who gaze upon the cross in faith and steadfast love will be ultimately and eternally saved.
- ▶ Today's liturgy is a reminder of the price that Jesus paid for our sins and that sin though we may, we are assured of eternal life if we repent and turn our lives over to God's providential care.
- ▶ The throne of the cross is the throne of hope for a sinful, broken and wounded world.
- ▶ This feast occurs midway in the year from Holy Week. It is another reminder in the liturgical cycle that we are called to embrace the cross of Christ and live in its shadow each and every day of our lives.
- ▶ This feast invites our serious reflection: are we willing to die for the sake of others? Are we willing to die to our own sinfulness so as to live with Christ?



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to ONE or MORE appropriate questions (as time allows) in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface their insights in the wider group. Catechist responds by sharing his or her own experience. See appendix for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What is the Good News in the Gospel?
- ▶ What is the lesson in this Gospel?
- ▶ What are the primary themes in this Gospel?
- ▶ In what way, if any does this gospel have anything to do with your life at this time in your life?
- ▶ Are you willing to die for the sake of others? What does that practically mean to you?
- ▶ Are you willing to die to your own sinfulness so as to live with Christ? What does that practically mean in your own life?
- ▶ What does it mean for your life that you are saved by the power of the cross?
- ▶ In what way have you been saved? What are the practical implications of your salvation? What discernible evidence is there that you have been saved?

Catechist invites participants to reflect on the following question in the group or in their journal.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

## CONCLUDING PRAYER

*THE PRAYER,  
O LORD MY GOD  
(By Saint Anselm.)*

*O Lord my God.  
Teach my heart this day  
where and how to find you.*

*You have made me and re-made me,  
and you have bestowed on me  
all the good things I possess,  
and still I do not know you.  
I have not yet done  
that for which I was made.*

*Teach me to seek you,  
for I cannot seek you  
unless you teach me,  
or find you  
unless you show yourself to me.*

*Let me seek you in my desire;  
let me desire you in my seeking.  
Let me find you by loving you;  
let me love you when I find you.*

OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.



## APPENDIX

- Are you willing to die for the sake of others? What does that practically mean to you?

Christian truth can often be reduced to pious platitude until one tries to live it. I can profess that I am willing to die for the sake of others, but when it comes right down to it and I am faced with the decision to act, the pious platitude does not seem so pious. It can seem untenable.

My family is called to die for the sake of another everyday in dealing with an illness of one of our members. I try to offer it up *for the sake of others* who similarly suffer and I am successful only when I yield to God's strength to help me. When I try to do it on my own I flounder. I become angry, frustrated and doubtful, much like the Israelites in today's first reading.

Suffering invites us into deeper and intimate relationship with God. The powerlessness of the cross invites us to enter into mature faith, and to cast off the distractions that keep us from intimate union with the God who knows us best and loves us most.

The challenge for me on this feast is to become more conscious of the grace that God provides when I am called upon to die to my own needs, my own will and trust God's power to lead and guide me/us through the difficult trials of life.



## Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from the celebration of the liturgy:

Cross  
Salvation  
Jesus Christ  
Sacraments

Life Issues  
Liturgical Year  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

### CROSS

Today's liturgy is a perfect occasion to reflect upon the cross of Christ and our baptismal call to live the Paschal Mystery of Christ—to join our lives to his life, mission, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on the HOLY CROSS of Christ.

### SALVATION

Today's liturgy exalts the salvation won for the human race by Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on what our Church teaches about the mystery of SALVATION also known as SOTERIOLOGY.

### SACRAMENTS

The Church teaches that every sacrament makes present the Paschal Mystery of Christ—that is we are given access to Christ's death and resurrection in every sacrament of the Church. Sacraments bring Christ's life and ministry into our midst. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on what our Church teaches about SACRAMENTS.

### JESUS CHRIST

Today's focus on the Cross is a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect on the person of Jesus Christ—how can we know he is who we believe he is? It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on what our Church teaches about JESUS CHRIST.

## **LIFE ISSUES**

Jesus was a victim of capital punishment. He was an innocent sufferer that was unjustly executed. His death is an invitation for us to consider what the Church teaches about life, especially about capital punishment and all other forms of life from womb to tomb. It is thus appropriate that today we focus our attention on what our Church teaches about LIFE ISSUES.

## **LITURGICAL YEAR**

Any Sunday of the year is an appropriate time to reflect on the cycle of the Church year. Every Sunday is a most appropriate time to address what we celebrate in the unfolding liturgical cycle. The entire mystery of Christ from his incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension to the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit is manifested in one complete liturgical year. It is thus most appropriate that we address what the Church teaches about the LITURGICAL YEAR.

## **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Thus any Sunday would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.

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